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EL GRECO'S ITALIAN PAINTINGS (1560-76) BASED ON BIBLE TEXTS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to interpret a selection of El Greco's Italian paintings (1560-1576) based on Bible texts in which ideas current during the Catholic Counter-Reformation are symbolised. At the age of nineteen El Greco, who was born in Crete in 1541 and was initially an icon painter in the Byzantine tradition, went to Venice. Through study and experiment, and by following the examples of other artists who had achieved artistic mastery and was of proven Catholic orthodoxy, he educated himself as an artist in the Western manner. Even during his years as an apprentice El Greco's art is proof that he aspired to the highest humanly accessible values exemplified by Renaissance artistic theory, humanism and Christian spirituality — all of which later came to fruition in an unprecedented original combination in Toledo, Spain, where he settled permanently in 1577.

In order to interpret El Greco's development during his formative years as a Renaissance painter, it is necessary to investigate his early attempts at a cohesive arrangement of forms in an *ordo* and its narrative figuration, the *historia* — that is “history” painting, more especially narratives based on Bible texts. At the outset it should be stated that the content of works of art only gains in symbolic meaning by the formal means of artistic representation, and this is especially true in the case of El Greco's Italian paintings with a religious message.

Born in Crete in 1541 and educated in the Byzantine tradition of icon painting, Doménikos Theotokópoulos (called El Greco) came to Venice at the age of nineteen and probably became an apprentice in Titian's (c. 1488-1576) studio, the greatest of Venetian great masters. He had much to learn about his craft before he could become a competent Western painter, following the traditional way of apprentices, that is of emulating contemporary masters. El Greco's Italian sojourn (1560-76), spent in Venice and Rome, was thus a period of experimentation and learning. Amongst other memorable works he produced a first version of the *Annunciation* (1570-75, Prado Museum, Madrid) in which he emulated Venetian painters, most notably Titian and Tintoretto (1518-94), but also achieved a degree of originality.

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In Venice El Greco made himself a Renaissance artist through study, continued practice, and emulation of works by predecessors and contemporary artists who had achieved proven artistic mastery. This working method (*maniera*)¹ is summarised by David Kipp (1984:234), based on Alberti's insight that "to the extent that the 'universal' man makes himself equal to all that 'pertains to glory', he makes himself a microcosm of the realm of the highest humanly accessible values." No doubt, El Greco aspired to the values exemplified by Renaissance humanism and artistic theory, as well as Christian spirituality.

However, the emphasis in this discussion of selected Italian paintings is not on El Greco's use of prototypes (including Michelangelo's sculpture), but on his unique and personal approach to the religious subject matter of his Italian works, and also on the evidence of his inventiveness in solving compositional problems so as to create images in accordance with the *historia* ideal.² Even though El Greco's first representations of the Annunciation and other themes reveal inept attempts at rendering three dimensional space by means of perspective, he eliminated drawing and compositional errors in repeated versions of the same theme, and the emphasis in his paintings shifts from correct *disegno*, that is line drawing and correct perspective, to *poesia*, based on the medium of oil colours that had a decisive influence on the general style of Venetian artists. They achieved brilliance in colour, luminosity and a subtlety of modelling which contradicted the linear (*disegno*) ideal of central Italy. Above all, Venetians believed in the expressiveness of colour to convey meaning. For this, Lodovico Dolce was the main spokesman. He believed that "paintings need to move the spectator" (Roskill 1968:187), and these words may also be taken as a definition of the Venetian's concept of "*poesia*" which, in Venice, melded with *colorito*. Notwithstanding El Greco's initial attempts to master *disegno* and perspective, that is artistic approaches based on geometric norms, he remained a colourist, even though the tonality of his later works became cool, due to the influence of the central Italian mannerists.

No doubt, El Greco's early religious works, painted in Italy, represent his response to the artistic ideals formulated by the Council of Trent, 1563, and the further glossing by Cardinal Carlo Borromeo (one of its original drafters) who stated:

Only such images as conform to scriptural truth, traditions, ecclesiastical histories, custom and usage of our mother the Church may be painted. Likewise, nothing false ought to be introduced in the painting or carving of

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- 1 For an analysis of El Greco's *maniera* or personal working method, see Maré (2002).
 - 2 Like an orator's speech the *historia* was to comprise a composition of parts. Thus, there is a correlation between the structure of the orator's speech and the art of painting and its parts, namely outlining, lighting and composition (*circumscriptio, receptio luminum, compositio*). Such an harmonious whole Alberti designated an *ordo*, comprising the placing together of parts so that together they become a representation of reality.

holy images, neither anything that is uncertain, apocryphal, and superstitious; nothing [of that sort], only that which is in agreement with custom. Similarly whatever is profane, base or obscene, dishonest or provocative, whatever is merely curious and does not incite to piety, or that which can offend the minds and eyes of the faithful, all this should be avoided. Just as the likeness of the saint whose image is to be portrayed should as far as possible be accurate, in work [of this kind] care must be taken that the likeness of no other person, either living or dead, be deliberately depicted [... for] in all these matters, attention should be paid to represent them in agreement with historical truth, church practice, and the rules of the Fathers (quoted from Voelker 1982:228-30).

During his lifetime, El Greco was considered to be a philosopher, a scholar and a humanist, and the contents of his library testify to his wide range of interests.³ He read works in classical Greek, Italian and later also in Spanish. As one might expect of a painter in the service of patrons such as Diego de Castilla, the Dean of Toledo Cathedral, El Greco was well versed in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its liturgy. Therefore one may also assume that he kept in his possession the Resolutions of the Council of Trent.⁴ No doubt, he also knew the Bible by heart.

1. SELECTED PAINTINGS

The following Venetian (figures 1-4) and Roman (figures 5-6) paintings have been selected for discussion as examples of El Greco's process of assimilation and re-creation of sixteenth century Italian artistic forms and religious values:

Figure 1 *Flight into Egypt*,⁵ 1565-1570, oil on panel, 15,8 x 21,5 cm, private collection, venue unknown.

Figure 2 *Purification of the temple*, 1570-71, oil on panel, 65,4 x 83,2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Figure 3 *Christ healing the blind*, 1565-68, oil on canvas, 66,5 x 84 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

3 Wethey (1962a:24) is the only source of this information.

4 See Wethey (1962a:4). Wethey (1962a:78, note 15) surmises that El Greco probably possessed the Greek translation of the Resolutions of the Council of Trent, published in Rome in 1583.

5 Wethey (1962a:57) explains:

Although the work [Flight into Egypt] is unsigned, it is sufficiently like other early compositions of El Greco in Italy to assure the attribution. [...] The drawing and the modelling of the figure of St. Joseph with his back turned is particularly typical of the young master.

Figure 4 *Christ healing the blind*, 1569-1570, oil on canvas, 119,4 x 146,1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Wrightsman).

Figure 5 *Purification of the temple*, 1571-1575, oil on canvas, 46 x 59 cm, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota.

Figure 6 *Christ healing the blind*, ca 1571-75, oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm, Galleria Nazionale, Parma.

These works are divided into two groups: The first four listed above were executed in Venice and the last two in Rome.⁶ The choice of paintings with themes which El Greco repeated in Venice and Rome reveals the artist's response to different artistic environments.

During El Greco's Italian period, religious themes were not his only preoccupation as he experimented with a wide choice of subject matter, including portraiture. However, the selected paintings all have religious themes and are crucial in the development of the artist's manner of religious expression.

2. THE VENETIAN PERIOD

The *Flight into Egypt* (figure 1) refers to Matthew 2:13-14 that gives no details of the way in which the Joseph and Mary fled with the Child to escape King Herod's wrath. The painting is less interesting as a imaginative interpretation of a Bible text than it is important for the understanding of El Greco's personal approach (*maniera*) to figural composition at a very early stage in his Venetian career.



Figure 1: El Greco, *Flight into Egypt*.

⁶ In this regard the dating of the various versions of *Christ healing the blind* proposed by Vechnyak (1991) is accepted and followed.

El Greco depicts Joseph pulling at the halter of the donkey bearing the Virgin and Child, forcing it to change direction so as to pass over a narrow slab of stone which forms a bridge across a stream. Joseph's movement determines the dynamic nature of the composition and the straining human figures and donkey. The emphasis is on curvilinear, twisting forms. The Virgin is depicted frontally, but turned in the direction in which Joseph is pulling the animal. The figure of the nude Child is also portrayed in *contrapposto*, that is with his head and right arm in planes that are different from the axis of his torso. Twisting is most evident in the figure of Joseph who is depicted at the exact moment of pulling the animal's halter against its directional impetus, that is, at the crucial moment when the turning animal is precariously balanced under the weight of the Virgin and Child who are straining to retain their balance. To complement this, the forces exerted by Joseph and the donkey are demonstrated in reverse by the two trees in the middle distance, set above and between the figure of St Joseph to the left and the group consisting of the donkey, the Virgin and Child to the right.

A spiral-like movement flows from the Virgin's head, through the Child's twisted body, and continues through the donkey's mane to its bridled muzzle. Likewise, a curvilinear motion flows through Joseph's torso, uniting the figure to the left with the group to the right. This movement is also echoed in a modulated form by the undulating landscape. Flux and stability counteract each other throughout the composition. This brings to mind what Erwin Panofsky (1969:20) wrote about Titian's *Assunta* (Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice): "The whole composition throbs with a movement which transcends individual movement." El Greco's paintings at this early stage in his career cannot be compared with Titian's great achievements, but he was certainly striving to emulate the master's skills.

Apart from the painting's stylistic importance, El Greco may have intended the *Flight into Egypt* to capture the moment at which the fleeing group turned to safety. The path along which they have come seems to be on a lower level than the bridge, suggesting — as does the threatening sky — a turbulent journey across a landscape of rolling hills which now belongs to the past. Thus, the motif of the narrow bridge suggests a difficult transition from one situation to another, not only at the historical beginning of Christianity, but for El Greco it was possibly symbolic of his own career at that time. Hence, it is the moment of transition that interests the painter and not the cessation of movement during a period of rest, as is usually the focus of representations of the Holy Family during their flight. Therefore, Wethey (1962a:21) assesses El Greco's *Flight into Egypt* as "individual ... having no exact counterpart in any other work, and his artistic originality is clearly evident."

The next example, the narrative of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 2), is based on the narrative related in John 2:14-16, in which Christ is described as resorting to force to clear the temple premises of illicit vendors. El Greco clearly intended the work to be a symbolic reference to the "cleansing" of the

Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, as well as the restoration of art as an autonomous expression of spirituality, while not explicitly contravening the rules prescribed by the Council of Trent, that allows the artist a personal interpretation of "historical truth" (see Borromeo's statement above). As an apprentice in the Venetian style, El Greco therefore took the opportunity to demonstrate his skills, especially as a figural painter, without ever exceeding the limits of decorum. In the open-air scene in the *Purification of the temple* he emulated the spatial qualities of Venetian painters, most notably Tintoretto, who included architectural views closely related to stage scenery as developed earlier by Baldassare Peruzzi, Serlio,⁷ and other Renaissance architects, following the principles laid down by the Roman architectural theoretician Vitruvius. This is evident from El Greco's application of perspective, placing the emphasis on straight and diagonal lines of sight in the setting, according to the construct devised by Alberti for a *historia*.

Alberti believed that the great task of the painter was to create a narrative that required a mastery of the optical theory of centralised perspective, since a semblance of reality cannot be conveyed successfully by objects and figures in a painting unless they are placed together in a geometrically determined spatial relationship. If a painter were to conform to the ideal formulated by Alberti (1976:75) of a "*historia* that you can justifiably praise and admire," an abundance of figures in a variety of poses would have to be included in a painting:

I say that *istoria* is most copious in which in their places are mixed old, young, maidens, women, youths, young boys, fowls, small dogs, birds, horses, sheep, buildings, landscapes and similar things.

He adds that provided the variety is appropriate to what is represented in the picture

... variety [in every *istoria*] is always pleasant. A painting in which there are bodies in many dissimilar poses is always especially pleasing. There some stand erect, planted on one foot, and all the face with the hand high and the fingers joyous. In others the face is turned, the arms folded and the feet joined. And thus to each is given his own action and flecion of members; some are seated others on one knee, others lying. If it is allowed here, there ought to be some nude and others part clothed in the painting; but always make use of shame and modesty (Alberti 1976:76).

⁷ For a discussion of the adaptation of Serlio's designs as architectural motifs in the paintings of Titian, Tintoretto and other Venetian painters, see Gould (1962).



Figure 2: El Greco, *Purification of the temple* (first version).

El Greco followed Alberti's advice quite literally and included the recommended variety of figures in the *Purification of the temple*. The figure of Christ wielding a whip in the middle distance is related neither to the groups on either side of the picture, nor to the partially clothed woman and other foreground figures, such as the old man to the right who is probably modelled on the prophets of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, while the full bodied reclining woman is unmistakably derived from Veronese or Titian's nudes and may be added to emphasise the lack of decorum of the setting that had to be cleansed. Emphasising the need for the cleansing of the temple, Gabriele Finaldi (2003:88) mentions the fact that though El Greco omitted the oxen described in the Bible texts, he included "the partridge, rabbits and oysters in the foreground, which were ritually unclean animals and signify the defilement of the holy place". However, in the cage are pigeons or doves which the poor offered for sacrifice when they visited the temple (Leviticus 5:7). This kind of offering was also done by Mary and Joseph when they brought Jesus to the temple for the first time (Luke 2:21-24). The trussed lamb in the foreground, together with a small cask of wine, are obvious references to the passion of Jesus and the redemption afforded by Eucharistic symbolism. Likewise, the graceful nude children filling the space to the right may also be justified by the Gospel reference (Matthew 21:15) to children who acclaimed Jesus in the temple. However, they are reminiscent of Parmigianino's Christ child figures, while the elongated niche statues recall those in Raphael's *School of Athens* (Vatican, Rome) and the column statue in Pontormo's *Joseph in Egypt* (National Gallery, London), thus turning the painting into an eclectic ensemble with references beyond its explicit theme, a veritable temple of the arts. However, at this stage of El Greco's development as a Renaissance painter,

emulation of the Renaissance masters may have been of as great importance as getting the Biblical *historia* right.

The structural contrasts between light and dark, and between background and foreground, are striking. The light of day is visible through the main archway, while the receding tunnel like interior space beyond the small archway is artificially lit by candles. The light from these candles enhances the dramatic appearance of the two main protagonists, framed by the main archway. The stage like space of the vestibule opens up beyond the main archway to reveal several buildings in the Venetian style. The storm clouds which contradict the stability of the architectural forms, accentuate the sense of tension. Contrast is also used as a device in the juxtaposition of empty and crowded spaces. Although deep space is suggested by the use of perspective, the space around Christ where the movement originates is flattened even though crowded with figures. The Quattrocento-style perspective framework based on a paving grid pattern leads the eye to the entrance of the temple beyond the vestibule where the action is taking place and is complicated by the irregular steps in the foreground which form a podium and widen towards the spectator. An attempt has been made to open the composition out to all sides, suggesting that El Greco had learnt from Titian who, Panofsky (1969:5) notes, "had an almost claustrophobic dislike of boxed interiors closed on all sides". At this stage in the youthful artist's work the dichotomy between the illusion of deep space and the crowding of figures into a restricted and confined area has yet to be resolved.

Since the setting is an architectural fantasy, one may surmise that El Greco created a "memory image" based on the principles of the mnemotechnic art which had been developed by classical rhetoricians. According to Frances Yates (1966:174), the Venetian Renaissance ideal of memory recommended places and images (*loci et imagines*) with a realistic but also imaginative and fantastical quality, reflecting the "divine macrocosm in the microcosm of his [Renaissance Hermetic man] divine *mens*." The setting in the *Purification of the temple* may thus be taken to refer to elements of Venetian painting which El Greco had borrowed piecemeal from other artists but had synthesised in an unmistakably personal way, and combined to form a narrative which conformed to the requirements of an Albertian *historia*.

The next Venetian painting, the first version of *Christ healing the blind* (figure 3), also reveals El Greco's knowledge of the requirements for the representation of a *historia*. All four Gospels include an account of the miracle: Matthew 9:27-34 and 20:29-34, Mark 8:22-5, Luke 18:35-43 and John 9:1-22. With variation in detail all these texts describe how Christ healed the blind man by mixing his saliva with soil to form mud which he applied to the blind man's eyes. On a literal level, this incident forms the theme of the painting in which details of the texts are collated and visualised in a contemporary Venetian setting, incorporating compositional complexities that are as ambitious as those of the *Purification of*

the temple. The figures of Christ and the man whom he heals are central to the composition and occupy the foreground space, off-centre to the left. A city square in the background recedes towards a pedimented gateway, and a group of figures witnessing the scene is gathered to the right, while in the middle distance are two seated men. Behind Christ and the blind man is a stooping figure and a group of four people who seem to be unaware of the main action. The extensions of the lines of gesture of the kneeling blind man and the figure to the right with his back to the viewer, meet at the vanishing point in the middle of the gateway, placed slightly left of centre in the picture. The movement of Christ's hand towards the blind man is reinforced by the line of the arch behind him. The centre foreground of the picture, between the dog sniffing at the blind man's bundles in the lower area in the foreground, and the two men conversing in the middle distance, is demarcated by receding tiles and is left empty, while the groups in the foreground are crowded to either side.



Figure 3: El Greco, *Christ healing the blind* (first version).

On the basis of the above description one may once again assume that El Greco was aware of the required components and structure for a *historia*, especially the emphasis Alberti placed on gesture. In this picture, the viewer's attention alternates between the left and the right sides of the composition, while the lines of the perspective construction created by the paving draw his glance towards the vanishing point. The painting not only portrays the act of healing but other peripheral activities which also receive visual emphasis. This is especially true of the gesturing group to the right. Repeating the dynamics of the scene below, the clouds above the groups to the right seem agitated, a stylistic device El Greco also applied in the *Flight into Egypt*. In contrast to the restless movement surrounding them, Christ and the blind man are serenely composed and framed by the grounded forms of the background architecture.

This device ensures that they are the main focus of attention in a composition comprising the recommended variety of *historia* elements and figures.

Christ's touching the blind man's eye (a touch which also mediates spiritual vision) has the same creative quality as God's when he raises Adam from the earth in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. In El Greco's picture Christ is the only frontally rendered figure, indicative of hierarchy (as also in the *Purification of the temple*, discussed previously), and emphasising his dominant presence in the composition, even though he is not centrally placed. Pictorially the gesture of the man on the right with his back towards the viewer seems to "push" the crowded figures to the right into the background, while Christ's stance is suggestive of forward movement and so becomes a metaphor for a transition from one situation to another, the same device which El Greco used in the *Flight into Egypt*. The blind man is posed as if he is about to rise and reach for his belongings. This anticipated movement would make him the centre of focus in the foreground which he becomes in the Roman version of the Purification of the temple (figure 4).

In the first version of *Christ healing the blind* El Greco depicted a variety of complex movements in order to reinforce the narrative, and this gives to the composition the appearance of a staged drama. He has meticulously delineated even figures that are not directly involved in the main action. Prominence is given to the seated men in the middle distance and to the group behind whose heads there is another circular group, included for the sake of variety. This second group probably includes the mute whom Christ healed after restoring the blind man's eyesight, as related in Matthew's Gospel. Perhaps El Greco's composition conveys what could only be conveyed in a lengthy sermon, that is, that Christ's simple but direct action had the power to restore the sight of a blind man, a power which the sage-like figures to the right (reminiscent of Raphael's philosophers in the *School of Athens*, Vatican, Rome) did not possess.

In his Venetian paintings El Greco applied luminous colour as required by the rules of *colorito*, but also attempted to create carefully structured architectural settings or loci for his figures. Despite the gains he made in mastering *disegno*, he was probably aware of his ineptitude in figural grouping, but the glowing colour so characteristic of Venetian painters, offsets this shortcoming.

As a reason for proposing that El Greco painted the second version of *Christ healing the blind* (figure 4) in Venice, Irina Barskova Vechnyak (1991:177) points out that it is, in fact, the most Venetian of the three versions because

... its coloring has the greater variety, luminosity and richness. The figures rushing into an arcade are a direct quotation from Tintoretto's *The removal of the body of Saint Mark* (Venice, Academia). The arched structure in the background is the same one included in the first version;

but in the Metropolitan Museum's picture (figure 4) El Greco has added an obelisk behind it, thus making it a more secure reference to Serlio.

She nevertheless also points out

... that certain features in the Metropolitan Museum's version are more peculiar to the Roman than the Venetian school of painting, such as the semi-nude man seen from behind (to display the artist's mastery of anatomy), the unfinished head (to the left of Christ), reminiscent of one of the sons in the Laocoön group, and the two half-figures in the foreground (Vechnyak 1991:179).

The two bust-length figures in the foreground may possibly be the parents of the blind man, summoned to confirm that their son had been born blind, as related in John 9:18-23.



Figure 4: El Greco, *Christ healing the blind* (second version).

To emphasise the spatial depth of the background the main figures are brought close to the foreground plane, and the scale of the buildings in the foreground is increased and brought up closer behind the figure to the left. Background figures thus appear to be off the "stage" of foreground events, and their occupations are unrelated to the foreground figures, but unified by the receding perspective grid. When one compares figure 4 with the earlier version (figure 3), an important difference is that the figure of Christ is moved somewhat closer to the centre of the picture while still being frontally posed. To Christ's left a youth — already healed — is presented with his back to the viewer, and is partially cut off. The kneeling blind man's hand, resting on that of Christ, is now the focal point because it is placed on the perspective line to

the vanishing point in the centre of the distant archway which seems to be on an enormous scale since the figures below are dwarfed by its height.

The twisting and turning group to the right in the Dresden version (figure 3) is now reduced to only two full figures and several heads, while the gesticulating figure to the right, who may be a rhetor, is more dramatically twisted in a Mannerist way. Balancing the group to the right, the figures of Christ and the blind man are placed in a more calculated way than they are in the first version. The figures behind them seem remote and unconcerned about the miracle Christ is performing in the foreground. Wethey (1962b:41) notes that they “simply act as one of the elements used to increase the sense of space.” However, for the sake of comparing El Greco's manner of composition with that of his mentor, one may recall Panofsky's (1969:15) observation about Titian spatial composition: “Space constitutes itself by a sequential arrangement of colored shapes rather than by means of geometrical construction. He builds it *from* objects instead of distributing objects *within* it.” Clearly El Greco has not yet reached the master's level of competence, judged by the fact that his figures are somewhat loosely distributed in the laboured construction (to use Vasari's phrase) of perspectival space.

Notwithstanding ineptitudes, the Metropolitan Museum's version of *Christ healing the blind* represents the achievement of a painter who has already developed a distinctly individualised manner and is able to paint on a more monumental scale. François Aussaresses (1960:74) puts it thus:

This then, is a painting Greco began in Venice, which he took with him first to Rome and afterward to Toledo, where after his first successes with large paintings, he brought it into its present state. If it were only, in this sense, an autobiography of the artist's style, it would be invaluable. ... But it is far more in the feeling that one gets of a great double drama being enacted — on two levels, the divine and the human.

This assessment is correct in as far as El Greco continually reworked previous themes and in the process not only gained painterly competence, but also achieved more layers of meaning in the repeated versions. The *Purification of the temple* and the versions of *Christ healing the blind* painted in Venice contextualise the ideals of Counter-Reformation in that the cleansing and healing processes they represent are symbolic of the cleansing and healing of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the idea of a renewal of the “temple of the arts” and restoration of sight may also be a reference to a renewal of artistic values which El Greco would explore further in Rome.

3. THE ROMAN PERIOD

El Greco's emphasis on the setting, such as occurs in the Venetian versions of *Christ healing the blind*, not only incorporates references to the principles of Venetian painting, but also local architectural settings and features which were reminiscent of the kind prescribed for a classical rhetorician practising the mnemotechnic art. The most striking feature of memory, as paraphrased by Yates (1966:174) from the *Ad C Herennium* by an anonymous author,

... is the sense of space, depth, lighting in the memory suggested by the place rules; and the care taken to make the images stand out clearly on the *loci*, for example in the injunction that places must not be too dark, or the images will be obscured, nor too light lest the dazzle confuse the images.

Indeed, this may be exactly what El Greco was doing in the *Purification of the temple* and *Christ healing the blind*, of which he produced new versions in Rome.

The second version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 5) was probably painted during El Greco's stay at the Farnese Palace when he came most deeply under Michelangelo's influence, as suggested by Elizabeth du Gué Trapier (1958:85) who points out that the figures to the left, with upraised arms, "curved gracefully over their heads, casting luminous shadows on their faces", recall the youthful figure in the Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco near the *Sacrifice of Noah*.

The painterly and stylistic techniques in this version are noticeably more proficient, accomplished and masterly than those in his first attempt. Spatial depth has been increased and the depiction and grouping of figures are pictorially more satisfying. El Greco's technique of colouring remains Venetian and the application of pigment is impasto. Wetthey (1962a:68) is of the opinion that this painting is "undoubtedly the masterpiece of El Greco's Italian period." Even though its style is eclectic, the complexity of the problems solved proves the astonishing speed with which El Greco learned to work *di natura* and also to emulate other artists. In no sense was he a mere passive recipient of influences; everything he learned became the basis for his own artistic achievement.



Figure 5: El Greco, *Purification of the temple* (second version).

There are no important changes in the subject matter of the second version of the *Purification of the temple*, but there are significant revisions of details. The most striking of these is that, in the place of the bound lamb in the lower-left hand corner of the earlier painting, El Greco has painted four faces. These are, presumably, portraits of Titian, Michelangelo, Giulio Clovio and Raphael. The group of four portraits to the right is conspicuously unrelated to the main composition and ambiguous in the compositional context. No satisfactory explanation has been put forward for their inclusion in this specific work. Since the four artists are not witnesses to the scene El Greco seems to be paying homage to their artistic ideals by including them. The inclusion of two Florentines, a Roman and a Venetian in the same group may imply that the painter believed himself to have achieved a synthesis of their various ideals. The evidence for this may be that in this particular painting El Greco has clearly succeeded with a synthesis of *disegno* and *colorito*.

If the setting is interpreted as a memory image one may point out that the theatrical scene represented contains images of sixteenth-century Italian painting. El Greco calls to mind, in an arranged group, four great artists of the Cinquecento and, as if following the advice on memory in *Ad C Herennium*, “we see a number of our acquaintances standing in a row” (Yates 1966:32). Indeed, one may concur with Eva Brann (1991:302) that “All visualisations are, [...] at bottom, memory images”.

In this composition there is a calculated formal balance evident in the grouping and actions of the figures. Those to the right of Christ are less agitated and are posed more gracefully. The polarity between force and grace has been better resolved in this version, especially in the figure of Christ. His frontal aspect

is now even more clearly emphasised by the winding and curving outline of his figure and in the simplification of the folds and texture of his robe. The parallel lines of the bent elbows of the two main figures respectively protruding and receding, are pictorially balanced, and are more posed than in the first version. With less emphasis on Christ's figure's advancing right knee, his pose becomes more statuesque. The calm atmosphere of the surrounding scene confirms the impression of balance. The balance of delayed movement has precedents in Michelangelo's *Victory* (Bargello, Florence) and Pontormo's *Descent from the cross* (Sta Felicità, Florence), and was already evident in the *Flight into Egypt*.

The face of Christ is reminiscent of the Byzantine Pantocrator, probably influenced by El Greco's early Orthodox education. El Greco also followed the Byzantine tradition of including an important figure as the main focus of the composition, while in *historia* painting it was more common to include among a variety of figures, one prominent figure which was not necessarily centrally placed. The centrality of the Christ figure driving the dealers from the temple precinct is reinforced by his bold gesture of wielding a whip. The effect of this kind of gesture on the viewer was, however, central to Alberti's theory of painting, which John Spencer (1957:42) surmises was derived from a statement by Quintilianus (1960:XI, III. 67):

Nor is it wonderful that gesture which depends on various forms of movement should have such power, when pictures, which are silent and motionless, penetrate into our innermost feelings with such power that at times they seem more eloquent than language itself.

In the later version of the *Purification of the temple*, El Greco represents Christ as the ideal figure who penetrates our innermost feelings, with painterly assurance. Likewise, the figures in the foreground and to Christ's left embody the extent to which he has assimilated the concept of idealised beauty. This version is stripped of most of the naturalistic detail present in the earlier version; drapery and anatomy have been simplified and as a more self-assured artist, El Greco no longer seems to be obliged to include references to other artists. Also, the Palladian architectural setting has acquired a different function. Although it has not lost its framing quality, it has been moved forwards, narrowing the "stage," while the columns appear as elongations of the participants. The niche statues have disappeared and the scene is moved forward, closer to the viewer's space. A cityscape closes the deep space which, in the previous version, extended beyond the large arch, and the temple interior is now even more remote.

What Elizabeth du Trapier (1958:84) criticises about the later version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 5) is the unnecessary emphasis on genre which, though typical of Venetian painting, detracts from the religious content. This is actually true for the first version presently under discussion. However,

it is doubtful whether El Greco intended the details of either of the representations to be understood as genre. Instead, one may assume that he used them as elements to actualise an ideal *historia*, as described in the quotation above. The focus is on the figure of Christ and his action which manifests his authority. Here again, El Greco seems to have followed Alberti's (1976:80) advice to the painter that each person's bodily movements must be in keeping with his or her dignity, and should be related to the emotions he wishes to express. Most important, the greatest emotions must be expressed by means of the most powerful physical indicators. Clearly, the physicality of the figure of Christ expresses his intense emotion. The figure is poised in a continuous serpentine twist, resembling a spiral form, held in equilibrium for the moment prior to unleashing the blow which he aims at the vendor. The victim wards off the anticipated blow with a raised elbow so that both figures are balanced in attitudes of transition and their gestures are imbued with additional pictorial emphasis, framed as they are by the large arch which opens onto the city.

Both versions of the *Purification of the temple* may be interpreted as allegories of the Counter-Reformation, but more importantly as displays of El Greco's artistic skills. Judged according to Alberti's humanist assumption, a work of art may be interpreted as a microcosm of the artist, and thus represents El Greco's synthesis of the cross-currents in Italian art of the sixteenth century. Again, this may explain the portraits which El Greco included to honour four great masters of the sixteenth century with whom he may have felt a need to engage in dialogue.

The architectural setting is arranged to occupy almost the entire middle and back sections of this picture. Trapier (1958:78) states that the background buildings in the versions of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 5) and *Christ healing the blind* (figure 6), done in Italy,

... have often been described as Venetian palaces, Roman ruins, or arches of triumph, but never identified, nor do they have an air of reality as though sketched on the spot.



Figure 6: El Greco, *Christ healing the blind* (third version).

In the third version of *Christ healing the blind* (figure 6), the physique of the blind man has become more muscular and his kneeling action gives impetus to the stride he is about to take. His gestures have also become more forceful. Energy seems to be directed in opposite directions by means of the various gestures, as if the requirements of *historia* have become too restrictive. The healing gesture of Christ is calm, but the blind man kneels in anticipation of the forceful movement with which he will rise from his affliction to depart healed. Especially dynamic, even though somewhat unrelated to the central theme, is the representation of the Hercules-like figure to the left. This is undoubtedly a reference to the figure of the mythical hero which stood in front of the Farnese Palace where El Greco resided. It could be that this figure was not intended as a mere mythological or classical allusion, but as a pious reflection on a Christ who is able to accomplish miracles gently without any display of physical strength. The tone of the painting is set by the young man at the extreme left, next to the Hercules figure, who looks out of the picture towards the viewer, as if in accordance with Alberti's (1972:83) requirement: "I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on." The expression of this figure is serene and detached, conveying his insight to the viewer and may thus represent the painter himself.

The influence of Tintoretto is still evident in the use of deep space, and in the dramatic utilisation of the stage-like setting in which less of the foreground is left unoccupied than in the Dresden version (figure 3) in which Christ's healing action is aligned sideways. In the second version of *The purification of the temple*, the action is directed towards the spectator who becomes more directly involved in the implied sequence of events.

In his summation of the salient characteristics of the second version of *Christ healing the blind*, José Gudiol (1973:33-4) notes the following three characteristics: a struggle to exalt dynamic form above scenography; the subordination of settings and backgrounds to figures, and the greater importance given to gesture. In the third version of this painting (figure 6), Gudiol (1973:34) detects a synthesis between the best features of the previous two versions, a greater balance between all the elements and “a compromise between the intensity of the forms and the more purely narrative manner of the first version.” Although one may concur with Gudiol, it also seems possible that, in the third version of *Christ healing the blind*, El Greco makes a final attempt at an *historia*, through the mastery of all the relevant elements of style, composition and presentation, but primarily through his depiction of figures, and to a lesser extent through his utilisation of a three-dimensional architectural setting. The figures in the foreground, which are placed on an undefined lower level, are spacers between the viewer and the foreground of the composition. Their presence implies that space extends beyond the foreground, to the left in the direction in which the youth is pointing, behind the figures in the middle ground, and to the right of the group on that side. The sense of space is not confined to the pictorial contained in the work, which depends on the construction of a perspective grid, but overflows beyond the picture in an attempt to extend the spatial confines of the “stage.” Francisco de Borja de San Román y Fernández (1910:197; 1927:306-9) points out that the small structure in the background is a copy of a little temple with quadripartite vaulting outside Rome, not sketched from the temple itself, but taken from an illustration in Sebastiano Serlio's third book on architecture, *Regole generali di architettura*. El Greco aptly contextualised the Roman origin of his own work by means of this architectural detail. Thus Keith Christiansen (2003:81) aptly states that “His three versions of Christ healing the blind exemplify the moment of his most intense engagement with Italian art”. It is certainly also El Greco's most intense engagement with contemporary religious ideals.

4. CONCLUSION

El Greco's paintings are replete with these inventions which enabled him, over time, to achieve a personal *maniera*. The continuous process of learning and inventing surely required great feats of memory and imagination and, above all, a superior endowment with *grazia*, both in the artistic and spiritual sense.

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